INTERVIEW:
WASHOKU, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese

By KUMAKURA Isao, President of the Shizuoka University of Art and Culture with *Discuss Japan*

Traditional Japanese food is collectively known as washoku. *Under the title, "Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese," the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) registered washoku on its Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on December 4, 2013. Discuss Japan spoke with* ***Kumakura Isao*** *who spearheaded the campaign for convincing UNESCO to add washoku to its intangible cultural heritage list.*

—— UNESCO registered* washoku *on its List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. We would like to start this interview by asking how you feel about this.

KUMAKURA Isao: If nothing else, as a member of the team that worked hard for this registration for two and a half years, I was extremely grateful for and delighted by the outcome. I think we can take great pride in this achievement as Japanese because our country's *washoku* was registered on the list of global representatives of the diverse cultural heritage of humankind. I am extremely pleased that the values of washoku were recognized in this way.

Definition and Characteristics of *Washoku*

—— We believe there is a growing tendency to, when speaking of Japanese food, envision sushi. Tell us your definition of washoku to help us explore this topic.

Kumakura: What is washoku? The first characteristic is that washoku is made up of three elements: cooked rice which serves as the staple food, soups and side dishes to make the rice more palatable, and Japanese pickles. This typical form is expressed with the term *ichiju-sansai* ("a bowl of soup and

A traditional *ichiju-sansai* Japanese meal featuring steamed rice and miso soup (front), three main dishes (two vegetable dishes and one of fish), and pickles (top left)
All photos: Courtesy of Professor KUMAKURA ISAO

three side dishes"). Since rice and pickles are always included they are omitted from the term, which is therefore formed based on a single soup (miso soup) dish and three varieties of side dish. Out of the three side dishes, one corresponds to a main dish and two varieties correspond to smaller side dishes.

The second characteristic lies in the respect for nature. The Japanese archipelago is surrounded by sea from all four sides, situated amidst excellent fishing grounds just where warm and cold currents collide. In addition, mountainous terrain makes up 75% of Japan's land, and the ample fresh streams emanating from these areas gives rise to abundant products from rice paddies, crop fields and mountain villages. Japan is situated in a moderate monsoonal region with four distinctly changing seasons and blessed with a humid climate which produces average annual rainfall of 1,800 millimeters, endowing the country with an extremely varied range of foods from the sea, mountains and countryside. Japanese food revolves around valuing these natural bounties and eating in a way that utilizes the natural flavor of the ingredients as much as possible. Take *sashimi*, raw fish eaten with soy sauce and *wasabi*, for example, which has always been the favorite side dish of the Japanese.

—— There are also the seasonings that bring out the best in ingredients.

Kumakura: There is also *umami*, which has been scientifically proven to be the fifth basic taste along with sweetness, sourness, bitterness and saltiness. The Japanese have recognized umami for eight centuries, and *dashi* soup stocks that extract the umami taste have since served as a basic of cooking. Through the skilled use of umami, the amount of other seasonings is reduced, which has the effect of bringing out the natural flavor of the ingredients even more. As Japan's traditional dietary culture lacked the practice of consuming meats such as beef, lamb and pork from the beginning, intake of animal oils and fats was low. Based on cooked rice and made up of mainly vegetable and fish side dishes, Japanese food has the ideal PFC balance—the proportions of proteins, fats and carbohydrates—making it extremely healthy. This is one of the reasons the Japanese enjoy an extremely long average lifespan.

KUMAKURA Isao, President of the Shizuoka University of Art and Culture

—— Tell us a little more specifically about Japanese dashi soup stocks and seasonings that work to make the most of the cooking ingredients.

Kumakura: Unlike in the West where people spend a long time preparing a sauce or stock to suit a dish each time they cook, people in Japan spend an extremely long time producing seasonings. Soy sauce and miso preparations take as long as six months. In Japan, people don't spend a great deal of time on cooking though they spend an extremely long time on their seasonings. In an extreme sense, slicing seafood is the only thing we do for preparing sashimi. But we eat sashimi

using a seasoning that took an extremely long time to prepare. This is a difference in the ways flavors are produced. Japanese take the approach of using seasonings to make the most of the original flavors of each food ingredient. Japanese prefer eating food with matching seasonings while appreciating the tastes of each food item and ingredient cooked.

The same goes for tempura. Tempura is deep-fried in oil, but the oil does not seep through the coating and reach the ingredients inside. In other words, tempura ingredients are steamed with the vapor inside the coating used for deep-frying them. The coating for prepared tempura provides the good taste of sesame oil while the ingredients inside give off their original sweet taste and flavor. Tempura dipping sauce, made of soy sauce and dashi, emphasizes the sweetness of the ingredients when diners use it for flavoring. In their mouth they can enjoy the harmony created by all these flavors and pungent grated daikon. This is a way of enjoying food unique to Japan. So Japan has a wealth of native food materials, umami that brings out the best in them, and original ways of producing flavors.

—— The tradition of* chanoyu *(Japanese tea ceremony) lies within that, doesn't it?

Kumakura: Actually no, that's not the case. Modern Japanese cooking underwent historic changes from the Taisho period (1912–1926) to the Showa period (1926–1989).

It may sound surprising but Japanese cooking was countryside cooking in the Meiji period (1868–1912). It was gaudy and all dressed up in the Meiji period. In other words, Japanese cooking was originally food to accompany alcohol and Japanese enjoyed their food more as something to admire visually than something to eat. It was Kitaoji Rosanjin (1883–1959), a well-known calligrapher, ceramist and epicurean, who tried to make Japanese cooking independent from alcohol by focusing truly and purely on flavors. Yuki Teiichi (1901–1997), a man who founded a Japanese restaurant in Osaka, introduced more modern and sophisticated ideas of *chanoyu* and *chakaiseki* (simple Japanese meals served before tea ceremonies) to the approach he had succeeded from Rosanjin. They played extremely large roles. Under their leadership, Japanese cooking became greatly refined from the Taisho to Showa periods. This refined cooking spread to all parts of Japan little by little in the period after the end of World War II, leading the way to the world of Japanese cuisine we know today. So, it wasn't until the modern era that chanoyu had a truly strong influence on Japanese cooking.

Table Manners for Washoku

—— Tell us about ways of eating, table manners and spirituality that characterize washoku.

Kumakura: Sets of chopsticks and tableware such as earthenware bowls and wooden soup bowls are characteristic of washoku. While spoons are used in the dietary culture of Republic of Korea, a fellow East Asian country, they are traditionally not found in Japan. Further, traditionally the Japanese often have individual tableware, especially their own chopsticks, rice bowls and tea cups, and dishes are often divided up individually, two points which differ from China. For this reason,

according to Japanese table manners it is acceptable to hold tableware in one's hands and slurp with the lips brought directly up to the bowl. In addition, customs seen in places like Republic of Korea where the rice and the filling are mixed and eaten in the same bowl did not develop in Japan. Instead the Japanese have a custom of bringing rice, side dishes and soup to their mouths alternately and enjoying the flavor while chewing. This can be considered a characteristic of how the Japanese eat. The variety of tableware used in washoku is arguably the most diverse in the world. Even individual plates vary widely, with not only square, elongated and round varieties but dishes shaped after leaves, folding fans and animals as well. There are also many different materials used, with dishes made from ceramics, wood, lacquer, bamboo or glass, and almost nothing made from metal.

Saying "*itadakimasu"* before a meal and *"gochisosama"* afterwards is Japanese people's way of expressing their gratitude for nature's bounty.

The locations for eating are also distinct. The Japanese custom is to accentuate natural views or the sense of the season by arranging seasonal flowers and place things like hanging scrolls as appropriate on a case-by-case basis to entertain guests.

While the spiritual foundations of the Japanese people have been strongly influenced by Taoism and Buddhism brought over from mainland China, even today they are rooted in the traditions of animism and ancestor worship. As a result, the concept of being together with divine spirits omnipresent in the natural world strongly connects the Japanese with nature. As the Japanese live in coexistence with nature and feel that they are kept alive by nature, when they eat, they have a habit of expressing their gratitude for nature's bounty with the phrase "*itadakimasu"* ("I shall partake") before a meal, and expressing their feelings of gratitude when they finish eating with *"gochisosama"* ("thank you for the meal").

Cultural Heritage List Registration

—— Tell us about an event that caused you to advance the campaign for registering washoku on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage.

Kumakura: UNESCO's protection conventions target various aspects of humanity's heritage, including nature, culture, industry and agriculture. Among them, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted by UNESCO in 2003 and entered into force in 2006. As a result, with the addition of performing arts such as Nogaku Theater and Joruri Puppet Theater and folk culture such as events held in Gion, Kyoto, thirteen of Japan's intangible cultural assets have already been listed. The convention targets "performing arts, social practices, festive events, arts and crafts, etc." and past listings have fallen within this scope.

However, with France's gastronomy and traditional Mexican cuisine being newly listed in 2010, the scope of listings has expanded to food culture. In response, in July 2011 a review panel was established with the aim of having Japan's traditional dietary culture listed as one of the world's Intangible Cultural Heritages.

Examining the examples of the two existing listings reveals two types. The first is the French example, which is a heritage borne by the entire nation and positioned as popular gastronomy. Here, gastronomy refers not to gourmet meals such as fine French cuisine, but rather the dietary habits of the French people, who regularly enjoy good-tasting meals as a social custom. The second type relates to dishes that use ingredients such as corn, peppers and beans which have been handed down for 7,000 years and serve as the focus of rituals and ceremonies, and the small towns of several thousand inhabitants that safeguard the heritage of such. In other words, while the first type suggests a nationwide food culture, with the second type the dishes are quite unique and the heritage is preserved by small communities. Our efforts began with an examination of these precedents under the convention.

—— Your team proposed registering washoku on the cultural heritage list with growing health awareness worldwide and a certain level of the recognition Japanese cooking had gained in the background. What were the points that gave you the most trouble?

Kumakura: Today, a remarkable sushi boom is making its way around the world. Japanese cuisine is also popular for its healthy and tasty qualities. Despite commanding high prices, Japanese foods are exported overseas due to the safety and peace of mind they engender. However, as the intentions behind the proposed listing are entirely separate from such trends, I would like to make it clear that this endeavor bears no relation to commercial schemes.

Japan's traditional dietary culture is currently undergoing a rapid decline in Japan, and a national effort is required for its protection and continuation. Given this, at the heart of the proposal is a hope that a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage listing will cause Japanese people themselves to reaffirm and place importance on the value of traditional dietary culture, and that this will create a national movement to pass this heritage on to the next generation. So that our aims would not be misunderstood, we consciously used the word "washoku" instead of Japanese cuisine. While the "*wa*" in washoku means "Japan" and thus refers to Japanese food, washoku refers to the traditional foods that Japanese regularly eat at home on a daily basis.

—— In other words, it was a French-style proposal, wasn't it?

Kumakura: Yes. Rather than nominating a unique regional dietary culture somewhere in Japan,

we proposed that all Japanese are the bearers of the heritage and that washoku forms the basis of the Japanese people's dietary lifestyles. Moreover, this traditional dietary culture often fulfills the role of bonds that strengthen solidarity between Japanese families and communities at annual events such as New Year and life events such as wakes and weddings. In particular, during the major earthquake that struck eastern Japan on March 11, 2011, we often saw scenes of the affected people sharing food with one another, and that elements of Japan's traditional dietary culture such as rice balls were of considerable comfort to people.

While the Tohoku region in particular is home to many excellent local dishes, with people being forced to live as evacuees and families being forced to disperse due to the earthquake, there is a risk that the local dishes which local groups have handed down at festivals and other occasions may fall into decline. In that sense, we also want the sense of urgency regarding this proposal to be understood.

—— We wonder if there were areas that required hard work in connection with your efforts to register washoku on the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list. We believe your proposal drew a line amid washoku's booming popularity around the world. Tell us a little more about the UNESCO-recognized values of washoku.

Kumakura: Japanese cooking has become relatively well known overseas, but I believe very few people abroad are truly familiar with washoku and Japanese cooking. I was particularly curious about the people at UNESCO. We had no idea if they had ever tasted Japanese food [laughs]. In the case of French cuisine, which was already registered, UNESCO is headquartered in Paris, the home of French cooking, and people around the world knew what this food was like. However, we felt few people had ever tasted Japanese cooking unless they had a real interest in Japan. We were really worried about whether the people who actually took part in this examination had ever tasted Japanese food. We thought it would make a huge difference if people with a certain level of knowledge read our proposal. The proposal was even harder because it focused on the washoku Japanese people eat daily, instead of Japanese dishes served in restaurants.

Europeans have a strong impression that all East Asians eat rice using chopsticks. This impression naturally causes them to wonder where Japanese cooking differs from Chinese or Korean cooking. Explaining that washoku from Japan is a particularly outstanding culture under these conditions was the hardest part of our registration proposal to UNESCO.

—— How did you overcome that difficulty?

Kumakura: For one thing, I think people who examined our proposal understood that washoku reflected Japanese people's approach to nature. Japanese people place great value on nature. They find food in nature and consume it with a sense of the seasons. Underlying this is a feeling of reverence for the fruits of nature. One aspect we wanted to promote to the UNESCO officials was that handing down such washoku to the next generation equates to preserving the natural environment of Japan, and, by extension, leads to protecting the natural environment around the world.

Another point is that washoku has been an important social convention. Put another way, washoku has played an extremely large role as a bond that connects people in a community and as a

tie that links families. This is the point we emphasized the most. We made a strong appeal regarding washoku's aspect as food that is a social convention supported by families and communities. Our proposal most greatly stressed the respect for nature and Japanese social convention.

—— What were the specific images of washoku you used for stressing those points?

Kumakura: One specific example is that we used video to stress the images of washoku as food for Japanese New Year's celebrations. We especially emphasized the images of traditional New Year's dishes known as *osechi ryori* consumed with the whole family, all relatives gathered for the occasion. We also stressed the images of people in the same neighborhood gathering to pound rice for New Year's celebrations. Using those images, we emphasized that, as a traditional social convention, washoku had acted as a bond for family members and people in the same community.

A family enjoys a typical new year's feast. Small saucers of *toso* (spiced sake, said to drive off ill luck) are here being served to accompany the new year's spread known as *osechi ryori*, an exquisitely arranged combination of seasonal foods.

Another image we stressed was that washoku has been one of the forces behind our recovery from great damage such as that caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011. UNESCO maintains the principle of limiting the number of cultural heritage proposals to one per nation. UNESCO gave priority to washoku over other candidates in examining proposals for the list registration because food has played extremely important roles in Japan's recovery from the March

11 catastrophe. In proposing washoku, we expressed Japan's position of setting great value on that aspect.

—— Do you think that UNESCO effectively understood the points you emphasized and accepted them as you had intended?

Kumakura: Yes. I think so. My impression is that UNESCO understood that washoku plays extremely important roles in Japan's annual events.

Everyday food is no doubt an important basis for communication for all people; that is certain.

But compared with other people around the world, I think Japanese think particularly deeply about eating. In other words, this thought is like an identity for Japanese people. This is my personal opinion based on my own experience. Take parties at American homes for example. Drinks and conversation, not food, constitute an important factor there. But you find a large quantity of delicacies when you go to parties at Japanese homes. Those delicacies astonish all foreign guests [laugh]. To treat originally, for the Japanese, originally meant to give a feast. The best thing a Japanese person can do to receive guests is to give them a feast. Japanese people place extremely great weight on the act of eating in that sense. Eating is a means of communication in the home and in communities. The same pattern is found among other people, too, but I think eating has been a particularly strong communication factor for the Japanese.

Washoku enjoyed a traditional community feast.

Identity Crisis

—— The trend toward nuclear families increased, local communities became impoverished and individualization advanced as Japan achieved development after the end of World War II. What do you think washoku's registration on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage means in light of these changes?

Kumakura: I think this registration is not the end, but the beginning. I have a sense of crisis that Japanese people themselves are beginning to forget the importance of washoku. Japanese people often use the expression, "friends who have eaten out of the same pot together." Eating together creates a sense of camaraderie in communities and societies. Japanese people will lose their identity as Japanese when they forget this important aspect. For example, Japanese people's peculiar sensitivity about things that touch their lips, and their extreme sense of fastidiousness, reflected on the use of individually owned chopsticks, have extremely deep relations with their sense of eating. Unsurprisingly, the sense of beauty and the physical feelings Japanese people have traditionally had will be destroyed when they forget this. Preserving traditional dietary culture called washoku is not an issue limited to cooking. I believe doing so means handing down the Japanese identity, too. Through washoku, we must make our young people aware of customs and senses undergoing the process of destruction, and of the identify that has become difficult to pass on. Our customs and senses are beginning to break down, but I don't think we have lost them. We must communicate the meanings of the senses we are beginning to lose. We must build up a campaign in that direction from this point on.

—— You believe that footing is very important for washoku.

Kumakura: Yes, that's right. I wrote in the objective of the proposal that our dietary culture known as washoku is in fact facing a crisis. I wrote that thinking we that we definitely have to make progress in the face of this crisis and expecting that washoku's registration on the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list would help that progress.

—— Preserving washoku and handing it down to the next generation are probably not easy things to do in view of our value and lifestyle changes. What do you think about that?

Kumakura: Over the past two decades or so, the food culture of the Japanese has undergone significant changes. The younger generation have increasingly come to embrace the culture of eating out at fast food restaurants and the like. Many pre-cooked meals are sold at supermarkets and department stores, advancing the phenomenon where people can take these meals home and instantly enjoy washoku, Western cuisine or Chinese food without having to cook at home. Families who don't eat all together but separately when it suits each individual are also on the rise. How to put the brakes on these trends and preserve the traditions of washoku is a major challenge facing Japan.

The first attempt at doing so is having children experience the deliciousness of washoku through their school lunches. While conventional school lunches have aimed to ensure children are getting the nutrition and calories they need to grow, in recent years there are more and more cases of washoku being incorporated into school lunches. Rice-based school lunches are now served an average of 3.1 days a week (five days), and it is hoped that this will properly instill the habit of eating rice among children. Initiatives where top-class chefs visit elementary schools to give children a taste of delicious soup stocks and conduct dietary education where parents and their children prepare washoku together are also being actively pursued. It is crucial that we properly impress the taste of washoku upon the children who will lead the next generation.

—— So, adults' roles and involvement are now called into question.

Kumakura: We must provide dietary education not only to children but also adults. There is a view that from here forward dietary education of men will be necessary [laughs]. Japanese men must really work in the kitchen. It's no longer possible for a woman in a family to cook all the food by herself. We must develop a structure in which all family members cook and eat.

Cooking classes like this one are held nationwide to teach children the importance of a healthy diet.

Flavors we experienced in childhood and the taste of home cooking are something we remember throughout our lives. Those things come back to our mind more as we grow older. The taste of our home cooking determines our sense of taste. We have picked up the tastes of miso soups and simmered foods cooked at home naturally since our early childhood. I believe those tastes are lifetime treasures and assets. Purchased, precooked foods ultimately do not substitute for the taste of home cooking.

To give an example, the Japan Culinary Academy is preparing dashi and inviting Kyoto City elementary school students to actually experience real umami. A father, mother and children cannot do the same things at each home, but they can prepare their foods together, however busy they might be with their work or cram school lessons. I believe it is extremely important for all family members to cook their rice, prepare their miso soup and sit around the dinner table together, even if that happens only once a day, or every three days. This is not just a food issue, but also a social issue in Japan.

—— Will the Basic Act on Food Education of 2005, which was positioned as the basis for living, intellectual training, moral education and physical education, be the basis as well?

Kumakura: Not necessarily. Japan has worked vigorously on raising its citizens' nutrition levels since becoming a modern state. The Basic Act on Food Education comes from the extension of such efforts. As such, it focuses on nutrition. Needless to say, this focus is important, but the Act is not covering food education sufficiently in its current form. We must think more about the quality of our food, because we are living in the age of abundant food. I'm not only talking about the substance of the Basic Act on Food Education. We must position the sum of things, such as the way of eating I just explained, the linkage of Japanese people through the act of eating, feelings toward, thoughts about and sensitivity for nature cultivated through the act of eating, as the basis of our food education.

It's natural for food to change. Food is not something we can keep in old ways. It must and will keep changing. But I think we will never forget the good taste of freshly cooked plain rice and the pleasant smell of freshly prepared miso soup. I believe those are the basics. It's OK for the substance of washoku to undergo one change after another as long as we keep those good tastes in our memory. We should instead create washoku that fits a new era. We can preserve the identity of Japanese people and protect Japan's natural environment eating ingredients from our surroundings by exercising our ingenuity in various ways, with cooked plain rice, side dishes and pickles as the basic washoku structure, and chopsticks and a soup bowl as important key factors. I believe that's the way washoku should be from this point on.

—— Do you mean such basics have timeless value and identity?

Kumakura: Yes, I think so. Japanese people's sense of beauty and sensitivity are involved in maintaining such washoku basics. Japanese people's sensitivity arises from their chopsticks and cooking ingredients. At the origin are seasons for natural ingredients. The high season, the period just before that and the period right after the prime are called *shun*, *hashiri* and *nagori* in Japanese. I believe such sensitivity toward seasonal progression underlies washoku.

It's fine to eat at first-class restaurants when you go to another country, but you wonder about foods local people eat everyday, right? I think when we become able to introduce foods Japanese people eat everyday to people from other countries and eat those foods with them it will be another way to secure understanding of Japanese culture.

—— You mean the registration on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage caused the awareness for washoku to spread and our responsibilities to grow at the same time.

Kumakura: Yes. The registration made Japanese people responsible for preserving and succeeding washoku. Japanese people and their government share those responsibilities. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; and the Cabinet Office all have divisions responsible for food-related policies. But I believe we must study issues such as the types of food Japanese people will need in the future, and advance policies for addressing them in a centralized way.

As an example, the Shizuoka Prefectural Government set up a facility in Fujinomiya City to meet responsibilities for preserving Mount Fuji following the mountain's registration on the UNESCO list of cultural heritage. Its government is advancing a plan to offer information for preserving the mountain's natural environment through the facility. I believe the Japanese government must implement policies and measures for preserving washoku as Japanese culture, too.

Dietary culture has not traditionally been the subject of the government's policies on the conservation of cultural assets. However, Kyoto Prefecture led the nation in certifying Kyoto's food culture as an important intangible cultural asset in its ordinance on the protection of cultural assets, and appointed noted chef Takahashi Eiichi as the person tasked with preservation of its techniques. To further bolster this preservation and continuation movement, we launched the National Assembly on the Preservation and Continuation of Washoku Culture on July 26, 2013. Moving forward, we hope to pursue the movement with support from Japan and overseas.

I think the most important thing is for Japanese people to take pride in washoku, their dietary culture, and have the strong determination to hand its values down to future generations.

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